

**AFTER A GREAT FALL, WHAT DO WE REMEMBER? WE REMEMBER THE CHEATING, AND THE LIES. WE REMEMBER THE CULT OF PERSONALITY THAT WE EAGERLY EMBRACED, AND THEN FELT BETRAYED BY. BUT WHAT OF THE MAN WHO FELL? WHAT ABOUT THE WORK HE DIDN'T CHEAT AT? WHAT ABOUT THE 16 YEARS LANCE ARMSTRONG SPENT BUILDING A GLOBAL CANCER ADVOCACY? DID IT MATTER? DOES IT STILL? DOES IT MATTER THAT LIVESTRONG, THE FOUNDATION THAT KICKED HIM OUT, NOW WANTS HIM BACK? DO WE CARE WHAT HAPPENS TO THE GREAT WORK A MAN HAS DONE, AFTER A GREAT FALL?**

Armstrong,  
May 15, 2014,  
Austin.





**HERE IN PURGATORY**, the mansion is smaller, but the wine cellar, paneled in rich mahogany and stocked with thousands of bottles, is truly magnificent. The TV will go over on that wall. The lighting system is still being installed but it will be all muted and indirect, like an art gallery.

Upstairs, he leads a tour of his art collection. The work is edgy and full of dark action: a photograph of a dancing couple with giant thorns emerging from their backs, a photorealistic painting of a woman jumping through a window, an empty desert landscape charged with eerie stillness. “That’s by Ed Ruscha,” he says. “He’s a friend.” There’s a giant wooden map of Texas on the wall. If you look close, he says, you see that every single line was burned into the wood with a pyrographic iron. “I like art that makes me go, How did he do that?” he says. “Stuff that is technically amazing.”

Later, he says, he’ll dig out a really beautiful piece made completely out of cockroach wings.

On the desk of his little office nook sits a sculpted arm made out of laminated skateboards that, in a perfect touch, ends in a fist with an up-raised middle finger.

The fall from an ordinary perch is a universal story. Few of us get through life without one taste of failure and disgrace. But the fall from a very great height is a different order of experience altogether, because it happens to a different kind of person—the kind who was driven to climb that high in the first place. Should it come as a surprise that such a person—this man right here—makes a lousy penitent?

Depression? Self-loathing? Emotional paralysis? Lance Armstrong will not indulge, thank you. A year and a half after the scandal that ended his career, after being stripped of all his trophies and confessing the ugly truth to his children and losing in a single day an estimated \$150 million, these are the circumstances to which he has been reduced.

A glass of wine, perhaps? Or is it time yet to mix up some of his special margaritas—Lanceritas he calls them—with the ice crushed just so? He loves his Lanceritas, and he loves his crushed ice.

Despite his preference for solitary sports, Armstrong also loves a full house. Little children are everywhere, their toys littering the floor of every room. In the kitchen, a coven of beautiful women is preparing dinner. One is his loving girlfriend, a Modigliani blond named Anna Hansen. Her equally beautiful friend teases Armstrong with easy intimacy, bringing a glass of freshly opened wine out to the outdoor sofas by the pool. “Here’s your wine, HRH,” she says. “We call him HRH for ‘His Royal Highness.’”

While the food cooks, Armstrong lounges—on this Sunday afternoon in Austin, the sun is bright and the temperature cool—watching a toddler in a Supergirl outfit wrestle his youngest son to the grass. Life is good, he insists. He has five happy children. He’s learned who his real friends are. And he is learning to not fight all the time. Really. A fringe benefit of crushing defeat is learning to accept things.

Except for that leaf scooper jutting up over his wall. The neighbor always leaves it sticking up there. Look at that goddamn ugly thing, man, ruining an otherwise perfect setting. It is most definite-

ly not perfect. Not perfect at all. You can see this incongruity just working on Armstrong, in his eyes, the set of his jaw.

“A couple more glasses of wine and you’ll climb over there,” a friend teases.

Halfway through dinner, Armstrong begins slurring his words. Just a little, barely noticeable. He detaches and focuses on his meal while his friends carry the conversation, chatting about Austin traffic and how the media only quotes the bad things. Some of Armstrong’s kids drift through, a little one sitting in his lap and begging for a sleepover. He masks affection with a pretense of crankiness, or maybe he is actually a little cranky. Either way, tonight every second of his forty-two years shows. Even here, in the afterlife, he manages to make relaxation look remarkably intense.

It bears reminding that before Armstrong became a reviled figure, this same intensity made him Herculean, to none more so than people all over the world with cancer. To those people, he remains a hero, and it is that work, he says, that has given his life the most meaning,

even though the global cancer charity he built and seeded with almost \$8 million from his own bank account told him not long ago it wanted nothing further to do with him and literally erased his name from memory, changing its name from the Lance Armstrong Foundation to the Livestrong Foundation.

But trail him for a few days and watch how giddy and hopeful the sick and the dying become in his presence, forgetting for a moment their nausea and pain and mortal fears. Amid all the controversy and disgrace, you admit, you forgot just how important Lance Armstrong was and still is to cancer patients everywhere.

“Yeah, you and about seven billion other people,” Armstrong says.

**LAST SPRING**, he even got kicked out of a local swim meet. This was six months after the USADA—the United States Anti-Doping Agency—issued the lifetime ban against him competing in any sport “under the Olympic umbrella,” which includes pretty much anything

anywhere. (The cyclists who testified against him, most of whom were just as guilty, got six months.) But he figured a little Austin swim race would be okay. It’s Austin, for chrissakes, his refuge, and the organizer said it was fine, he could swim—but then *one* guy had a problem and the calls went from Austin to Florida to Switzerland and finally the answer came back: No, Lance Armstrong can’t even compete in a local swim meet. “Anything I try to do, any sport, even archery and volleyball, I can’t do it,” he says.

He’s sorry, he swears, for the lies and the bullying and the lawsuits against journalists. “It was indefensible,” he says. “Pure hubris.” But he’s not going to be a hypocrite, either. The doping charges were bullshit. “Nobody has stepped forward and said, ‘I really won those races,’” he says. “They didn’t award those jerseys to somebody else. I won those races.”

This we can stipulate: Lance Armstrong cheated death, and then he kept on cheating. And he was no run-of-the-mill cheat. Sublimely American in his ambition, he became the best cheater, greatest cheater of all time, turning a European bicycle race into a gaudy, ruthless, and unprecedented demonstration of American corpo-

rate prowess and athletic hegemony. He doped and bullied other bikers to dope and sued or harassed people for telling the truth about him, which is hard to forgive. But he wasn’t the evil genius who invented evil. At twenty-three days and twenty-two hundred miles, the Tour is so hard that cyclists have always sought some kind of performance enhancement. In the 1920s, they took cocaine and alcohol, and in the 1940s, amphetamines. In 1962, fourteen of them dropped out because of morphine sickness. Between 1987 and 1992, use of the blood-oxygen booster called EPO may have *killed* as many as twenty-three riders. But even that didn’t stop them. In his testimony to the antidoping agency, testimony that helped ruin Armstrong, a former teammate named Frankie Andreu told investigators that when they first met on the European circuit in 1992, both of them quickly realized that “it was going to be difficult to have professional success as a cyclist without using EPO.” This was, in fact, the “general consensus” of the entire team, Andreu added.

And that’s how things stayed. The year before Armstrong won his first Tour, seven entire teams left the race after an assistant for the Festina team was caught with massive quantities of EPO, testosterone, and human growth hormone. The year after he left, the first-place winner got disqualified because of a bad test. The handful of idealists who refused to take anything at all, men like Darren Baker and Scott Mercier, quickly learned they couldn’t compete and dropped out. Everyone in cycling was aware of this history, and everyone knew the charges against Armstrong—the first book-length exposé came out way back in 2004. Nike even made them the subject of one of its most famous ads, a montage of swooping bicycle attacks matched to Armstrong’s confident narration:

*Everybody wants to know what I’m on. What am I on? I’m on my bike busting my ass six hours a day.*

He was a spectacular product, a very winning brand, and as long as he kept protesting his innocence and a shred of doubt persisted, anyone remotely associated with him continued to profit. Trek Bicycle doubled its sales, Nike washed away the memories of its sweatshop scandals, his teammates shared the profits from his victories, and his foundation pulled in hundreds of millions in charitable donations. The rest of us profited in more subtle ways. In the dark days that followed the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Armstrong was a living American myth, the troubled and cocky natural who fought testicular cancer and came back to win the hardest sports event in the world seven times in a row. *Seven times in a row!* It was a resurrection, a modern miracle. He appeared on Wheaties boxes, starred in those iconic Nike ads, presented a bike to Bill Clinton at the White House, hung out with Bono and Sean Penn, dated Sheryl Crow and Kate Hudson, and wrote a best-selling memoir called *It’s Not About the Bike* that inspired cancer patients like nothing had ever inspired them before. He replaced the phrase “cancer victim” with “cancer survivor” and made it so hip to wear a yellow Livestrong bracelet, ninety million of them sold at a dollar apiece. John Kerry wore one on the campaign trail. John McCain talked about cancer at a Livestrong event. There was serious talk about a campaign for governor of Texas.

Armstrong believed in this story as much as anybody. He came out of a shabby little Dallas suburb like a snarling dog, son of a scrappy teenage mother who still hasn’t forgiven the dirty looks of her classmates and a stepfather who cheated frequently and beat him with a fraternity paddle. “As bad as he says his childhood was,” one old friend says, “it was worse. And the lesson he took from that was that people will fuck you, and you have to fight for everything you get.” In sports, he transformed that lesson into a warrior’s code. “Did you ever hear about how when you stab somebody, it’s really personal?” one coach told him. “Well, a bike race is that kind of personal. Don’t kid yourself. It’s a knife fight.”

Armstrong treated the doping charges like a knife fight too, playing the cancer card shamelessly—in one Nike ad, racing along narrow roads in his iconic yellow helmet, he sneered at his detractors:

*The critics say I’m arrogant. A doper. Washed up. A fraud. That I couldn’t let it go. They can say whatever they want—I’m not back on my bike for them.*

Cut to a cancer ward, where the camera panned over the chemoravaged patients to teach those silly critics a lesson in what’s really important.

And he got away with it. Despite all the rumors and accusations, Armstrong retired in 2005 with a clean record. His fatal mistake was trying to make a comeback four years later—and that is where his story goes into a deeper level of myth. As in a prophetic tale, he remembers one particular night of grim foreboding in Fort Davis, Texas, when he sensed his comeback was going to bring down the furies. He and Anna were at a café. “Every part of my being said, I gotta fucking stop this right now—I can’t do this. And Anna, bless her heart, was saying, ‘What are you talking about? What’s the problem?’” But he couldn’t stop. The sponsors were chomping at the bit for a comeback. The foundation and the fans were excited. Fate was beckoning him, and he couldn’t turn away. “I would do anything to be sitting back in that small café with Anna, and make a decision to just call it off.”

Then it all vanished in an instant. Cor-

“I’ve gone from light speed to a school zone,” he says, “and part of me doesn’t mind.” Here with his youngest, three-year-old Olivia. “Dude, she’s out of her mind. She’s just like me, that crazy-ass kid.”





nered for transgressions that surprised absolutely no one inside the sport, Armstrong suffered one of the most astonishing and brutal reversals of fortune in American history, a level of punishment so extreme it raises the question of what was really being punished.

A year and a half later, Armstrong is still trying to figure out the answer.

**EVERY WEEK OR SO, HE SITS DOWN** in the little office nook at the end of his living room and turns on his laptop camera. This message will be for Melody Ruggles, a sweet-faced nurse from Michigan who was diagnosed with colorectal cancer in 2011. As a medical professional, she knew right away how bad the diagnosis was. An immediate bowel surgery and a painful course of chemotherapy followed, but before long the doctors discovered fresh spots of cancer. To cheer her up, a stepdaughter named Jynell Tackett started a Facebook page called Melody's Get Well Card Drive and invited people from all over the world to send cards saying they were thinking about Ruggles. One of the invitations got to Armstrong. By that time, new lumps had shown up on her liver and small intestine.

This was just a few months after the scandal broke, and he was still in a cocooning phase, hiding out from the world. In the video, light comes in slices through the Venetian blinds behind him. He's wearing a T-shirt and forgot to shave. There's the smallest hint of a haunted expression in his stony face, as if he's looking down a long tunnel with no light at the end. But right now, thankfully, it's not about him.

Hi, Melody. I'm Lance Armstrong. I just wanted to send you a short video message to let you know that I'm thinking about you and I'm pulling for you. I understand you've had some up-and-down news when it comes to your health. Just hang in there and know there are brighter days ahead. If there's anything I can ever do to help you, please let me know. In the meantime, keep kicking cancer's ass. Best of luck.

This might not seem like much, but Tackett says the message gave Ruggles a boost that lasted for months. "She has so much more energy to fight this now," she said. Partly this was because the other celebrities who responded sent preautographed cards, and partly it was because of Armstrong's own medical history. "To have someone who's been through cancer take the time to not just send her a card or have someone put it in front of him, but to actually read the story we sent and to make the video—whatever happened with Lance, whether he did drugs or didn't do drugs, he went through chemo and he still went up and down all those hills. So it said to Melody, 'Whatever you're going through, you can go on.'"

And for a moment at least, Armstrong gets to be the man he used to be.

**ARMSTRONG'S OLDEST FRIENDS** are worried about him. "He may think he's not going through a terrible time," one says. "But he's going through a terrible time."

They're the first to see his flaws, describing him as a control freak with no filter who always pushes every person as hard as he can. "If you ask him for advice, he'll say you need to lose ten pounds and go faster on the bike," says an old friend named John Koriath. "Very cut and dry, just 'Shut up and do it.'"

But the way they see things, everything is connected. They remember when he first came to Austin and got the nickname FedEx because he always had to have it overnight. He was boastful, he liked to say he was a "training zero and a racing hero," he'd hit the

bars at night and chase women constantly.

Fame made everything worse. For years, Armstrong flew around on a private Gulfstream in a constant hum of attention and activity. He went through every day without being told no by a single person and drove his pilots so hard they complained about all the traveling. Women threw themselves at him. Men threw themselves at him. "He got a little insufferable," Koriath says.

But they also remember the first little charity ride in Austin back when his survival was still in doubt and the plan was to give the money to the American Cancer Society. "There was not a single ulterior motive," says another friend, who asked to remain anonymous. "It was absolutely heroic at just a base level, a dying man doing something good." But when the Society refused to earmark the money for testicular cancer, Armstrong reacted with his usual "Fuck you" and decided to start his own damn foundation. It turned into a spectacular success, pulling in more than half a billion dollars over the next fifteen years. "Lance was a motherfucker for cancer," says the friend. "He was as hard on everybody at the foundation as he was on anybody on the bike teams. He was like, 'That guy's not good enough, fire him.' 'Dude, he just lost his mother.' 'It doesn't matter, he's not cutting it.'"

Koriath tells the story of a Texas bike ride called Hotter'N Hell Hundred, held annually in the 100 degree temperatures of August. He was helping set up a fundraiser when he says a race organizer told him that it wasn't unusual for people to die in the race. Shocked, he called Armstrong. "Hey man, do you know that people die in this ride every year?"

Armstrong's answer:

Do you know how many people die of cancer every year?

The president of the Livestrong foundation is a cancer survivor named Doug Ulman. Armstrong found him working for a little cancer charity Ulman had started after his own fight to survive and brought him to Austin to work with him. In the following years, Ulman spent most of his time feeding Armstrong's unquenchable desire for an active role in the foundation. "I had a window to see

what no one else saw—the phone calls, the visits, the e-mails," he says. "When I'd hear people bad-mouth him, I was like, 'They have no idea what he's spending his time doing.'"

Never the most expressive person, Armstrong was awkward with other cancer patients at first, but he developed a practical approach. He would tell them to fight for better treatment, to insist on the best doctors, and to be ready to go to war with insurance companies. He would tell them to forget God and focus on good science, which made some people uncomfortable, but in this as in everything he would not be restrained. He also talked freely about coming down with cancer of the testicles and masturbating out a supply of sperm, because not only did he intend to survive, he was planning to become a father too. And he did all this with steely eyes and a steady smile, his natural abrasiveness adding a nice gritty texture to the underlying message: *I am a fearless warrior and you can be, too.* He became the patron saint of fighting like a junkyard dog.

For Armstrong himself, this defiant message became a vindication of his entire approach to life. To this day, his friends say, people ask why he risked everything for a comeback, knowing he was guilty and knowing he'd be tested and challenged more frequently than any athlete in the history of sports. Was he was trying to prove

he could win the Tour without drugs? Did he miss the limelight? Was it money? Did he long for the white-hot glory days of moral perfection at the head of his cancer foundation? All of that and more, the friends say. *The light doesn't go to the moth. The moth goes to the light.*

Now all of that has stopped completely and the man who won seven straight victories in the hardest athletic event in the world is stuck in his worst nightmare, a purposeless limbo. Only through his private videos and an occasional phone call from a cancer charity asking for help is he able to hold on to shreds of the work that has given his life its greatest meaning. "I don't think he wants to admit how sustaining it was for him," his friend says. "He doesn't think, Holy shit, that filled a hole in my soul, because he doesn't think about the hole in his soul."

**THESE DAYS, HE USUALLY WAKES UP** early and goes for a run—just five miles or so, taking it easy—and drops his younger kids off at school. Then he heads out to the golf course.

Today it's Barton Creek and his partners are John Koriath—known as "College" because he actually went to one—an older man they call "Coach," and another guy who is a lawyer. To make it interesting, they're playing for a dollar a stroke, with an option to multiply the final tally by a number of the winner's choosing.

On the first hole, Armstrong drives into the rough. College teases, "You got enough balls? You want to call the pro shop?"

On the second hole, Armstrong manages a birdie. Coach says he's luckier than a two-dicked dog.

Before everything came crashing down, Armstrong says, he hated golf. The game isn't natural to him. You have to swivel your hips and his legs were all about up and down. Now he takes lessons, plays eighteen holes, then goes home to watch golf on TV. Hansen jokes about being a golf widow, but Armstrong just shrugs. "What else am I gonna do?"

In the last couple of months, he's even given up on workouts. Sometimes he goes for a bike ride, but nothing too rigorous. "It's like, I don't really care," he says, a little mystified. "It's weird."

But he still loves to win. When he sinks another birdie putt, he crows. "Booyah! Line zero, baby! Wooh!"

But to this day, in any forum available to him, Armstrong refuses to repent on the main charge against him. He seems sincere in his regret for lying so insistently and suing people who tried to expose him, but on the charge of doping he simply cannot form his lips around the pious apology the public expects. The choice was clear, he says. He could either do what it took to win or go back to Austin and work in a bike shop. And he can't resist a dash of disdain for the people who admired him for being so relentless and then despised him for being too relentless. What about Michael Irvin, the Dallas Cowboys wide receiver? "I mean, he was getting busted with strippers and cocaine and shit. All the Cowboys, they were fucking nuts. And he had this one great line: 'I'm gonna catch a touchdown this weekend and it's all good.'"

But Armstrong they held to a different standard.

"College, putt this or chip it?"

"Chip it."



"Why?"

"'Cause you just want to bump it and let it run on down."

"I've never in my life done that."

"Well, time to start."

He doesn't even make the green and ends up doubling the hole.

He was on another golf course in November 2012 when he got the call from Jeff Garvey, the chairman of Livestrong. Garvey said he wanted Armstrong's resignation. The media pressure was too intense, the news trucks had been parked outside their doors for weeks, donations were evaporating—within a year they would drop 35 percent. For a rare moment, Armstrong was just speechless. To be pushed out of his own foundation, abandoned at his lowest point, that was the worst blow of all. His golf partner that day, his buddy Chad, gave him some advice: "Look around you, Lance," he said. The golf course was in Hawaii, high up on a bluff overlooking the Pacific with the sun sparkling on the water. "This is the view on the worst day of your life."

Armstrong bends over his club. "I have to think about this shot for a second," he says. "I can't fuck this up."

His ball sails right to the green, and for a moment he exults. "Did you see that? Holy shit! I thought that thing was gonna go right in the hole!"

For a moment he loses himself in the pure feeling, *becomes* the victory in a way that summons the glorious days when winning was the definition of his life. But now he's at the mercy of the whim-



sical god of golf, and his game falls apart on the back nine. “I shit the bed,” he says later, disgusted with himself. But there’s one consolation—he wins the wager, taking \$450 off Coach. The victory may be small, but his joy in winning will never go away.

**SITTING AT HER KITCHEN TABLE**, dressed in a simple gray outfit that looks like workout gear, Hansen remembers the final days when everything fell apart. First, in October 2012, came the antidoping agency’s report, released just days before Livestrong’s fifteen-year gala. She can’t help thinking that was deliberate and malicious. “We were going to have to go stand in front of all of these thousands of people. You’re almost, like, physically ill.”

Armstrong got through that night all right, sustained by his usual stoicism in the face of pain. Then his sponsors started dropping him one after another—in a single day, his phone ringing incessantly through yet another game of golf, he lost eight sponsors and \$150 million. Koriath was playing with him that day and marvels at how he shrugged off the calls and kept on playing. By that night, except for a few small business investments like his bike shop, he had no income at all and nothing to do with his days.

They took off to Hawaii, the Armstrong family’s favorite refuge. Hansen was at home when Armstrong got the fateful call from Jeff Garvey. He called her from the golf course. “They want me out,” he said. He sounded as close to miserable as she’d ever heard him. Garvey had been like a father figure to him—he called him Papa and had once arranged for Sheryl Crow to give a concert in his yard.

By the time Armstrong got back to the hotel, he was apoplectic. “This is ridiculous,” he said. “I’m resigning.” She convinced him to cool down and think it through.

All night he brooded. Just before dawn, he fired off a furious e-mail and cc’d it to every staff member at the foundation. When Hansen woke up, he told her, “I did it. I resigned. I sent the e-mail.”

Seeing the expression on his face, she knew it was bad. “What did you say?” she demanded.

He showed her the e-mail. In language later described by one of the recipients as “Armstrongese,” the gist was: “I spent fifteen years

building this and seven or eight million dollars of my own money and *never dreamed that it would be led by cowards.*”

It went on and on.

The next day, Armstrong sent the entire staff an apology, but it was too late. And that seemed to be the final blow that took the fight out of him. First he gathered his three older kids and told them to stop defending him because he had lied about a lot of things, a painful conversation that Armstrong refuses to discuss in detail, despite its humanizing potential. Then he flew to Austin to do the Oprah show alone, leaving the family in Hawaii.

He was nervous before the show, not sure what to say or who he would be after. Waiting for the taping to begin, he got a text from his oldest son, Luke, who was thirteen. “I love you, dad. You’ll always be my hero.” He reached Hansen on the phone and tried to read the message to her, but choked up. She’d never heard such emotion in his voice.

For months after that, they hunkered down “like it was a bombing drill,” Hansen says.

Armstrong is finally starting to relax a little, she says. He listens more. A few weeks ago he even took their son Max to a kid’s birthday party all by himself, sitting there just like a regular dad. “One of my girlfriends was saying, ‘I like Lance so much more now.’”

But the Internet never lets you forget. Just last week, one of the twins asked why she didn’t know everything. “What do you mean, everything?” Hansen asked. “She said, ‘Well, did Dad sue a bunch of people?’”

That conversation, she says, will probably take years.

**EARLY THIS YEAR**, Armstrong sat back down in his little office nook, wearing his Mellow hat and an old T-shirt. He flipped on the lap-top cam and gave the little camera at the top of the screen his stony winner’s staredown.

This time he was making a video for Kevin Scoggins, a beer distributor down in Cleveland, Tennessee, who’d been fighting lymphoma for nine years. Way back during his first round of chemo, Scoggins’s doctor suggested he try riding a bike to get back in shape. “I kind of laughed at him and said, ‘You’re kidding—I haven’t been on a bike since I was ten.’ The doctor said, ‘Well, it worked for Lance Armstrong.’ I said, ‘Who the hell is Lance Armstrong?’”

A little research turned his life around. “Just knowing some of the chemotherapy drugs he went through and still came back, it gave me an inspiration.” He started riding a bike and rode it religiously. “Without that,” Scoggins says, “I don’t know that I’d be where I’m at now. I’m probably in better shape than I’ve ever been in my life.”

At least he was until last October, when his condition took a bad turn. The gearheads at his local bike shop got the idea of contacting the gearheads at Armstrong’s bike shop, who sent word of Scoggins’s condition up the ladder.

*Hey Kevin, I’m Lance Armstrong. I got news from some friends of yours through the bike shop here in Austin, Mellow Johnny’s, that you’re going through a little rough battle with cancer. I wanted to send you a short video message to let you know I’m thinking about you. I know there’s a lot of great folks down there in Nashville, a lot of great hospitals, a lot of great care. Rely on that. Trust your friends, rely on your friends, and let me know if I can ever help you, man. Best of luck.*

When the video arrived, Scoggins had just finished up several hospital tests, including a bone-marrow biopsy. When he opened it up and clicked on the link, the expression on his face was so powerful his wife pulled out her phone and shot a series of close-ups while he watched it. Somber and filled with wonder, he looked like a man receiving a benediction from some awesome higher power. “For someone of his magnitude and stat-

ure, after all that he’s been through, to take thirty seconds out of his day to send me a video and say ‘We got your back,’ you have no idea how momentum-building that is.”

As to the scandal, Scoggins shrugs it off. “The way I look at it, I don’t know anyone who hasn’t told a lie. I still appreciate all that he’s done. Without Lance Armstrong, there wouldn’t be a Livestrong Foundation, and I probably wouldn’t be alive.”

**BUT CANCER IS A TOUCHY SUBJECT** with Armstrong these days. Last summer, about six months after he did the Oprah show, he put on a fundraiser for a camp for sick kids, just quietly called a few rich friends and raised much of the camp’s annual budget with a single bike ride, but he never mentioned it to anyone, and won’t talk about it now. Hansen was the first to bring it up. He wouldn’t talk about the videos he makes, either. And he really didn’t want to talk about Jimmy Fowkes, a Stanford student from Oregon and longtime Livestrong activist who was diagnosed with brain cancer at thirteen and, after dedicating much of his remaining time to helping other patients, died in February at the painfully unjust age of twenty-one. As he approached the end, Fowkes put Armstrong on a short list of people he wanted to see on his deathbed.

Armstrong flew to California. Jimmy knew it was going to be the last time they would see each other. He asked Lance to come tuck him into bed. He said, “I love you,” and Lance said, “I love you, Jimmy.”

He will not talk about any of this, because he considers it unseemly and he wants to let Jimmy’s parents grieve in peace. But he did allow himself a tiny heartfelt Facebook tribute on the day Jimmy died. “RIP Jimmy Fowkes,” it read. “You have forever touched my life as well as millions of others. I will miss you. Jimmystrong...”

Even in that moment, his critics swarmed, with pitiless, lacerating comments. “I’ll bet he didn’t cheat,” read one.

**ON A COOL AFTERNOON**, on the deck of a little restaurant near his house west of the state capitol, Armstrong is working on a dark beer. He’s wearing the Mellow cap and insists the word is descriptive. “I go Zen as much as I can,” he says.

He realizes that this may not be how he appears. He’s the least patient person he’s ever met, in fact, especially when it comes to personal interactions and confrontations. Which is why, now that he’s got teenagers and needs all the patience he can muster, everything may turn out to have been for the best.

At least he’s not hiding anymore, he says. For years, every time he got asked about doping, the stress kicked in—*Oh, fuck*—and he went on the attack. He was defending himself, his team, his sport, his foundation, everything all mixed together. Now he has nothing, so he can say anything he wants. Really, it was probably for the best.

He switches to a margarita. Crushed ice, please. He hates the cubes. He was getting tired, too. For fifteen years, he was trying to train and also deal with the rocket ship of success. There was so much traveling, so many medical conferences, so many events with donors. “Now I’ve gone from light speed to a school zone, literally, and part of me doesn’t mind.”

At some point, he says, you have to be the guy who plays golf five days a week.

But Armstrong can’t suppress his taste for the provocative. Did Nelson Mandela really forgive the people who put him in prison for

twenty-seven years, he asks, or did he just say that for public consumption? He compares himself to Bill Clinton so many times he finally says he shouldn’t compare himself to Bill Clinton, that it must sound vainglorious—and then switches the comparison to other legendary names. “People are fine that Michael Jordan was a jerk, they’re fine if Wayne Gretzky was a jerk, but they weren’t fine with me being an asshole. They expected that perfect story.”

He would also like people to know he really was clean when he came out of retirement for the 2009 Tour de France. He cleaned up along with everyone else once the nearly foolproof doping-detection method known as the “biological passport” came in, which was why the whole antidoping inquisition was pointless. The problem was

**LIVESTRONG PRESIDENT DOUG ULMAN TELLS ME SOMETHING VERY SURPRISING. “IF HE DECIDES THAT BEING A LEADER IN THE CANCER COMMUNITY IS WHAT HE WANTS TO SPEND HIS LIFE DOING,” HE SAYS, “THE FOUNDATION WOULD WELCOME HIM BACK.”**

already solved. Before his comeback, he called the infamous doctor Michele Ferrari, subject of so many doping rumors and investigations, and asked if he could still win the Tour clean. Ferrari said he had to run some numbers. Later he called back. “If you’re lucky.”

The antidoping agency accused him of cheating anyway, saying there was a one-in-a-million chance that Armstrong didn’t have transfusions of his own blood in ’09. “Bullshit,” he says. “They’ll find out someday, ’cause they’ll perfect that transfusion test. And I’ll be the first guy to say ‘Use it.’”

He orders another margarita. “Keep the same ice, bro. I love crushed ice.”

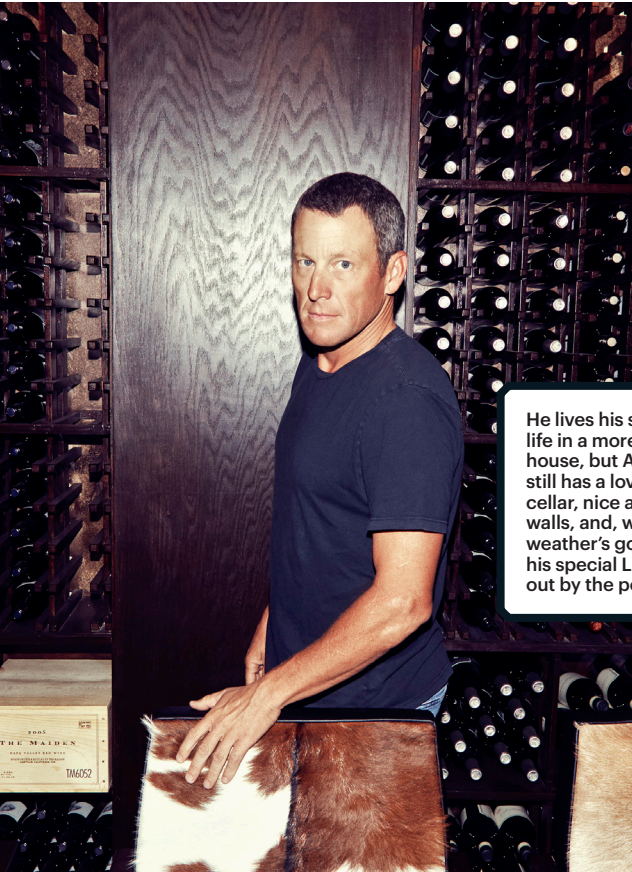
He walked down the road to this restaurant. He wouldn’t have walked anywhere before. He damn sure never would have walked a golf course. And next week, he’s off to Hawaii for some family time—zip-lining, swimming with dolphins. “The three-year-old, dude, she’s out of her mind. She’s just like me, that crazy-ass kid. The girl’s got balls you wouldn’t believe.”

Finally relaxed, he looks around. “This is a great little ’hood, man.”

**A FEW HOURS LATER**, I pay a visit to Livestrong’s stylish loft-style headquarters near Austin’s Sixth Street district. Donations have plunged 35 percent since Armstrong resigned.

To my surprise, Doug Ulman sounds like he’s ready for Armstrong to come back to work. “If he gets up in the morning and decides that being a leader in the cancer community is what he wants to spend his life doing, then the cancer community and the Livestrong Foundation would welcome him back.”

This is news. It will certainly be news to Armstrong, who was just grumbling about his exile back at the restaurant. Startled, I ask Ulman if he’s serious. “Are you really [*continued on page 106*]



He lives his salvaged life in a more modest house, but Armstrong still has a lovely wine cellar, nice art on the walls, and, when the weather’s good, makes his special Lanceritas out by the pool.

## The Afterlife

[continued from page 83] telling me that if he walked in that door and said, ‘I want to be part of this organization again, please take me back,’ you would say yes?”

Ulman looks uncomfortable. “Can I go off the record?”

“Sure.”

“I think in some respects, he’s waiting to be invited. And people here are waiting for him to express to them his authentic passion to be back. Both are waiting for the other to, like, make a move.”

Later, when Ulman agrees to put his statement on the record, he adds another detail. Not long ago, the foundation held a strategic planning session where people tossed out radical options to revive their flagging fortunes. One woman suggested that 2014 should be called the “Year of Redemption” and Armstrong should be given a desk in the office and he should come every day and work like everybody else, stuffing envelopes and making phone calls.”

“To pay a penance?”

“To say: ‘I want to do this.’ To say: ‘I’ll do anything.’”

**When I pass this message** on to Armstrong a few days later, he is completely thrown, and slows down to take in the surprise. “That would be the first I ever heard that,” he says, “and that seems awkward.”

This conversation takes place in a spare mansion loaned by one of his many millionaire friends, an absurdly lavish place with six garages and a loft concealed behind a bookshelf. Armstrong stays locked for a moment. He seems angry or annoyed. “I mean, I’ve mentioned numerous times that ultimately I’d love to go back, but nobody’s ever directly said that to me,” he finally continues. “So it seems awkward that it would go from Doug to you back to me. That’s a pretty significant statement.”

Ulman got married in Armstrong’s yard. They worked together at the foundation during the most hectic years. Just recently, Ulman was with Armstrong when he said goodbye to Jimmy Fowkes. Armstrong doesn’t understand why this message has to come through an outsider. He won’t let it go.

“Nobody’s ever told me that,” he says, shaking his head, incredulous. “Yeah, I don’t believe that.”

**This we can also stipulate:** The people who pushed hardest to bring Armstrong down had ugly motives of their own: Floyd Landis was angry because Armstrong wouldn’t hire him as team manager after his own dopingscandal. Tiger Williams wanted revenge because Armstrong wouldn’t let him use the Livestrong logo on his company’s shoe liners. Betsy Andreu wanted to blame someone else for her husband’s own doping. Travis Tygart, the head of the USADA and the man most directly responsible for bringing him down, openly despised Arm-

strong for his lack of faith. “If I personally was on the brink of death and went through a terrible situation and came out of that as an atheist,” he sniffed to one reporter, “I’d have no moral constraints.” But these voices represent all of us, who cheered Armstrong on his climb and cheered even louder for his disgrace, offended by the comeback that reminded us how aggressive he’d always been. The time for heroes had passed. The war predicated on lies went sour, and the economy crashed. The fever dream was over and we knew better now. In the end, that may have been Armstrong’s deepest problem. He kept flaunting his claim to innocence long after we all knew that none of us would ever be innocent again.

**Today, all questions annoy him.** What is the average person supposed to think when he still has houses in Austin and Aspen?

“I haven’t paid a price? Okay. I mean, I can’t talk about the price I’ve paid. That doesn’t do me any good.”

The remaining lawsuits—totaling as much as \$132 million—are off-limits, too. “I can’t talk about any legal stuff.”

And he doesn’t want to talk about the angry resignation e-mail. “It was clear that I was gonna be forced out, so yeah, I fired off a humdinger.”

“Can I get a copy?”

“Absolutely not,” he says, flashing the steely-eyed stonewall expression you can see in his infamous deposition of 2005, available from now till the apocalypse on YouTube. It’s intimidating.

“Absolutely not?”

“John, you can write what you want, but you’re not gonna get it from me. It’s too much.”

And he will not—*will not*—give a single additional detail about the explanations he’s given to his kids.

“No. No. I’m not gonna share conversations with my children. No way.”

It’s the old Lance Armstrong, who was never afraid to surge forward and *get in your face*—but then, suddenly, his forward momentum falters.

A moment later, he’s apologizing. “Maybe this is a lesson for me. I mean, there’s so much in tone and reaction and reaction time and I can imagine—I mean, fuck, for twenty years it probably really put people on their heels, and probably still does. I like to think it’s mellower now, but maybe not.”

He has gone around the world to personally tell the people he bullied most that he’s sorry. He flew to Rome to apologize to Italian cyclist Filippo Simeoni, to Paris to apologize to French racer Christophe Bassons. He apologized to former U.S. Postal Service soigneur Emma O’Reilly. He even apologized to Betsy Andreu, who was the only one to rebuff him. “I said, ‘I’m ashamed and embarrassed when I look back on that period. If I saw my son act that way, I’d be livid.’”

Today, he seems tired and trapped. “Don’t we all, when our backs are against the wall,

try to push back or fight or control certain things?” he says softly. “But this is so far gone, I don’t know what’s gonna happen. I can’t control what’s gonna happen. It’s beyond my control.”

He stops. “Now I’m whining,” he says.

**Armstrong leaned** forward and hit record.

*Hey Louis. I’m Lance Armstrong. I got a message from the folks over at Livestrong telling me about your health situation and current news. I wanted to send you a video message and let you know I’m thinking about you and pulling for you. I understand you’re seeing Dr. Einhorn so we know you’re seeing the best of the best. Anything I can ever do, let me know. One more thing, I understand you’re a member of the Navy. Thank you for your service. It’s truly appreciated. Hang in there, buddy!*

Louis Olvera remembers the exact moment he got that video. He was standing in an Ikea parking lot in Austin and feeling nervous about starting additional chemo following his visit a week before to the doctor who had saved Armstrong, Lawrence Einhorn of the Indiana University School of Medicine. “That video couldn’t have come at a better time,” Olvera says. “I was ecstatic. The idea that despite his situation, with everything that was going on last year, just to hear from him, to know that he still cares for the survivors, I was just really blown away. I’m still blown away. It’s an honor to share how much it meant to me and my family.”

**The problem now** is how to fill his days.

“If I’m still playing golf five days a week at fifty, my head will explode,” Armstrong says. His restlessness and need for a paycheck have brought him to Scottsdale, Arizona, to a “man camp” run by a local cycling coach named Jimmy Riccitello. Nine masters of the universe in biking togs bustle around a large Mediterranean kitchen, waiting impatiently for the rain to stop. Most of them started in sports and ended up on Wall Street and have paid Lance Armstrong an undisclosed sum to be Lance Armstrong for a few days. There’s one former Olympic wrestler, a couple of regular Ironman competitors. They’re chomping on protein and brimming with testosterone.

Finally the sun flashes. “Sun’s up, guns up!” one guy bellows. “We’re going to ride!”

They’ve been doing this for a couple of days now, riding all day and drinking many shots of Tito’s vodka at night. When someone remembers to bring limes and crushed ice, Armstrong mixes the Lanceritas. There’s an unmistakable element of safari to the whole thing, with Armstrong in dual roles of hunter and prey—a fellow competitor and also the Great Beast whose mounted head would look awesome above a rich man’s fireplace.

Already the trash talk is out of control.

“I came this close to beating Lance in the first race,” says a Wall Street investment banker named Ken Rideout. “I attacked like a rabid dog. I had a gap on him.”

On his phone, Rideout summons up the biking Web site where the race statistics were automatically uploaded by a wireless device.

Armstrong calls the guy “Ken Doll” and rolls his eyes. “I won,” he says flatly.

So Rideout teases him about his new orange helmet. “It’s like a traffic cone. I guess now that you’re old and retired you want to stand out.”

This is life among the alpha males, where the tournament of egos never stops. A few minutes later they set out in a pack, riding down the hills in a tight professional peloton, charging through deep puddles and icy rain like a single unstoppable machine.

After a few miles, a group of college kids joins the pack. Armstrong approaches them at the next stop. “Hi, I’m Lance.” He gets all their names and poses for pictures, grins all around.

The ride gets hard at the end, in the steep hills that lead back up to the mansion. A couple of the guys grab on to the follow car. “I don’t have it in the tank,” one says. “Too much vodka.”

Rideout pulls in first. “I’m the winner of the man camp! Lance, will you clean and hose my bike for me?”

Actually, the wireless data trackers will report that Armstrong won by four seconds. And that’s even with being delayed awhile when a rock hit him pretty good. Blood is flowing from his hand in a steady stream. A towel is soaked. That can’t pass without comment. *Somebody* has to take credit.

Rideout rises to the occasion. “I hurt Lance Armstrong! I broke him! I made him bleed!”

The whole group gathers around in a pack, drawn by the blood. It just won’t stop.

“He’s gonna fucking pass out,” one guy says.

“Maybe we could cook up a big batch of Crybaby Soup,” says another.

Somebody could go for bandages, of course. But the famous Armstrong blood, the subject of so many celebrations and investigations, is flowing out right there in front of them, and nobody wants to miss the moment. Lance himself looks at the wound in wonder. In all the years, in all the tight races against the world’s best, in all the crashes in the Alps, he’s never bled like this, he says. This excites the sharks even more. They’ve made history! Come to think of it, wouldn’t this be a splendid opportunity for some photographs? And doesn’t everyone want to crowd into the shot? Don’t we all want to be able to say, even if it’s just a joke to our friends, *I hurt Lance Armstrong, I made him bleed*? That’s some big game right there. And just look how docile he is, how quiet he’s gotten, how willingly he poses, the hint of blood sacrifice having become the meaning of this little ritual, the essence of this whole mean-spirited era when so many real villains have gone unpunished, with Lance Armstrong as everybody’s trophy.

Then, at last, Armstrong holds up his hand to show that the bleeding has stopped. “I think,” he says, “that I just finally ran out of blood.”